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Opinion

Falling backward

Kentuckians who have watched progress over the years, as the state climbed oh-so slowly upward from the bottom of the states in everything from adult literacy to per-pupil expenditure for education, must be profoundly discouraged at the news that Kentucky slipped way down in ranking on the well-being of our children.

The annual Kids Count survey, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, ranks states on 10 criteria in judging the well-being of children in those states. In recent years, Kentucky climbed every year, showing progress – not great progress, but progress nonetheless – until this year, when the state fell to 42nd in the nation, the lowest ranking of Kentucky in 16 years.

The Kids Count indicators found Kentucky fell in six categories, stayed even in two and rose in only two.

The survey found death rates among children ages 1-14 and teenagers 15-19 increased over the previous ranking. The number of Kentucky children living in poverty rose. So, too, the number of babies born with low birth weights. More Kentucky children were found living in single-parent households, and the

state dropped 20 spots on the ranking in the percentage of children living in families in which no parent has a year-round, full-time job.

It is, of course, that overall level of poverty that leads to babies with low birth rates, health problems that go untreated and lead to childhood and teenage deaths that should not happen.

And it is a level of poverty found in Kentucky's sprawling urban centers and in its remote hills and hollows – even in the shadows of the horse barns that grace the Bluegrass region around the capital city.

The Kids Count ranking is a stark reminder that progress is so much easier when there is ample state tax money to pay for programs combating low birth weight babies and jobs programs so that at least one parent in a family has a full-time, year-round job.

The impact of cutbacks in those programs over the last four years is now becoming apparent. We can boast all day about successful economic development initiatives, new plants and new jobs, but as long as a significant number of Kentucky children are growing up poor, Kentucky will never climb much beyond near the bottom of all the states.